

The strange death of Tory Liverpool: Conservative electoral decline in Liverpool, 1945–1996

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Abstract

In modern discourse, Liverpool is a by-word for anti-Tory sentiment, yet the city has not always been so inhospitable for the Conservatives. From the mid-18th century until the 1970s, the Conservatives dominated the city council and often held over half of Liverpool's parliamentary constituencies. Whilst popular opinion ascribes Conservative decline in Liverpool to Margaret Thatcher, Conservative Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, it began a decade before Thatcher gained power. This article argues that Conservative decline in Liverpool was due to the increasing inability of socialisation to create new Conservative voters, coupled with dissatisfaction with the Heath government and a rejection of unresponsive local party machines. The Liberal Party, through their use of pavement politics, were able to exploit these issues. Their 1973 local election victory allowed them to displace the Conservatives as the main opposition to Labour in most of the city, thus beginning the strange death of Tory Liverpool.

Keywords

Liverpool
Conservative Party decline
working class Conservatism
socialisation
Liverpool Liberal Party

Introduction

The Conservative Party was the dominant political force in Liverpool from the mid-eighteenth century, and remained so until the middle of the twentieth century. As O’Leary notes, ‘By 1914, the Labour Party occupied only seven of a possible 140 seats on the city council, and it was only in 1955 that Labour achieved its first municipal majority in the city’ (O’Leary, 2004, p. 157). Despite Labour’s victory in the mid-1950s, the Conservatives averaged 49.8 per cent of votes cast in local elections in Liverpool in that decade and 51.1 per cent in the 1960s. However, this domination was not to survive the 1970s. In 1972, the Conservatives lost control of the council for the final time and in 1987 failed to return a single councillor. Today, Liverpool is a by-word for anti-Tory sentiment. Indeed, so implausible is the idea that the Conservatives could be electorally successful in Liverpool that following the city’s 2012 mayoral election, BBC Radio 5 Live reported that the Conservative candidate was defeated by a rival dressed as a polar bear (Morse, 2012). Whilst incorrect, the Conservative candidate still finished a humiliating seventh on 4.49 per cent of the vote to Labour’s 59.33 per cent.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the causes of Conservative decline in Liverpool, a topic which has received remarkably little academic attention – perhaps due to the popular myth that Margaret Thatcher was the root cause of the phenomenon. The simplicity of this response has led to its elevation as ‘common sense’ but, as will be shown below, the decline began before Thatcher was elected party leader, let alone prime minister. Indeed, although decline intensified under Thatcher’s premiership, by 1979, the Conservative Party had already fallen significantly from its post-war high and was no longer one of the major players in Liverpool local politics.

This article argues decline was a result of changing patterns of voter socialisation, national political issues in the guise of the unpopularity of the Heath government and the rise of the Liberal party in the city which squeezed the Conservative vote. This Liberal rise is itself dependent upon two further factors: public dissatisfaction with the closed party machines in the city, and the innovative use of ‘pavement politics’ by the city’s Liberal Party. Whilst there was nothing inevitable about the Conservative decline in Liverpool, these factors came together in a ‘perfect storm’ in 1973 when the whole council was up for election to produce a surprising Liberal victory largely at the expense of the Conservatives. This result allowed the Liberals to create a new narrative, placing themselves as the main opposition to Labour in the city and on that basis squeeze the Conservative vote in most of the city’s wards. By contributing an account of why the Conservative Party declined in what was once an inner-city stronghold, this examination provides part of the historical context to current debates within

the study of British politics surrounding how the Conservatives can ‘win back’ urban and northern voters in England (Clark, 2014). A case study such as Liverpool also shows the need for greater nuance when discussing Conservative decline in the North of England more broadly (Randall, 2009), whilst also providing new material for comparison to other areas of Conservative decline, the most obvious being Scotland (Kendrick and McCrone, 1989; Seawright and Curtice, 1995; Finlay, 2012).

This analysis begins with a brief contextualisation of the Liverpool Conservatives’ position in the city, focusing on local election results. This is followed by an examination of the factors related to the Conservative decline in Liverpool, namely the effect that socialisation had on Liverpool’s electorate, the influences of national politics, the local party structures in the city and the rise of the Liberals through the use of ‘pavement politics’.

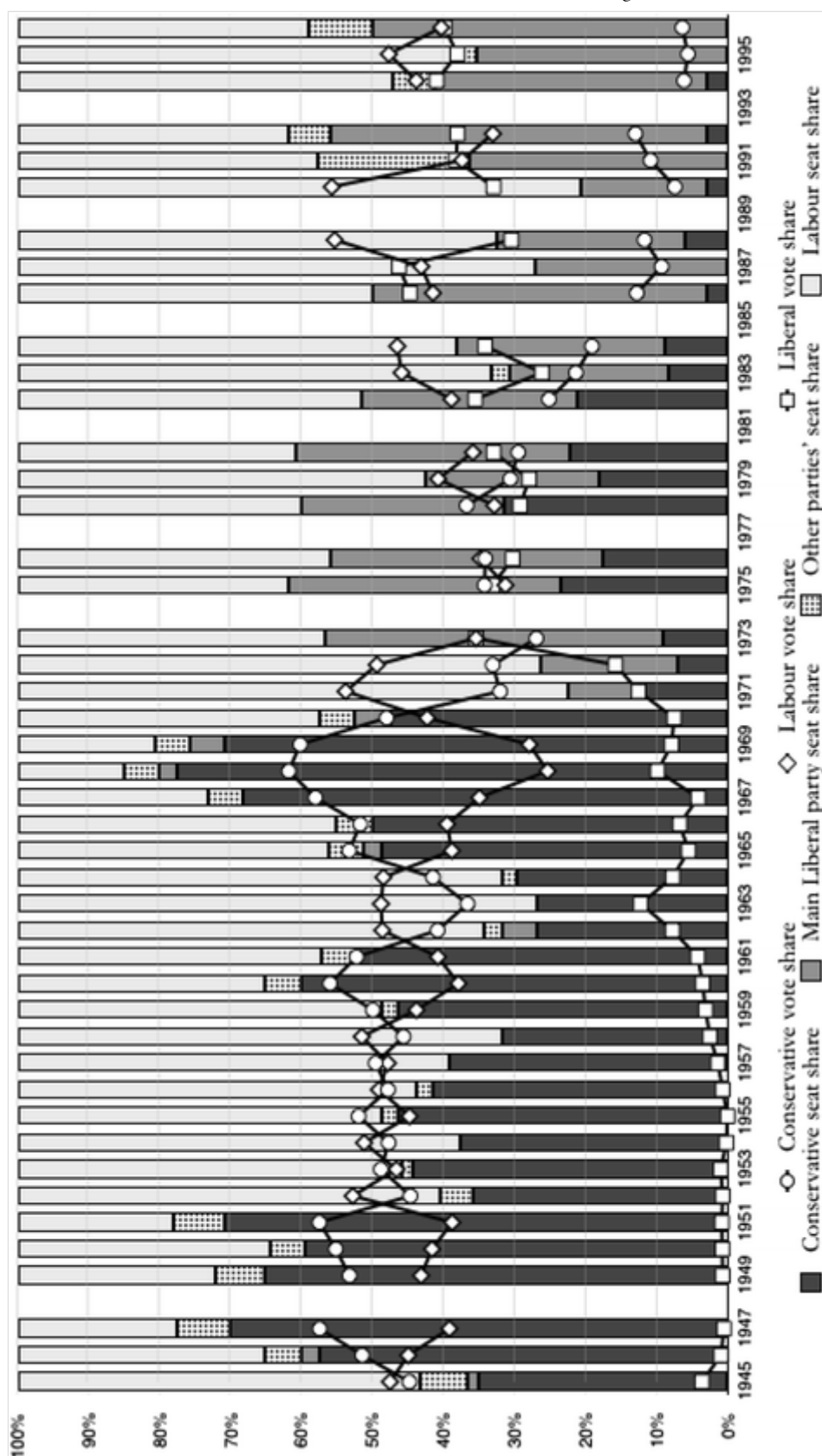
Contextualising Conservative Decline in Liverpool

For the purposes of this study, electoral support will be measured via local elections rather than general elections. This is because there were local elections every year bar one for the main period of focus (1965–1975) which provides a greater range of empirical data about the support for each party, as well as showing that Conservative decline was not as unidirectional as one would believe by looking solely at general election results. The extent and scale of the decline of the Conservative Party in Liverpool is best illustrated graphically. Figure 1 shows the vote and seat share won in each local election between 1945 and 1996.

Figure 1

Party vote share and seat share in local elections in Liverpool, 1945–1996.

Source: Rallings *et al* (2006)



Local politics in Liverpool can be split into three main periods. The first is between 1945 and 1970, when the vast majority of votes and seats were won by either Labour or the Conservatives, with the Liberals ~~finish~~ finishing a distant third. Apart from two independents elected in 1945, and the single independent elected in 1946 and 1947, before 1970 all other seats were won by the Protestant Party. The Protestant Party stood in the northern St. Domingo and Netherfield

wards unopposed by the Conservatives, and in return voted with them on most issues in the council chamber. Although more successful before 1939, they continued as an electoral force until the early 1970s. The party was disbanded in 1974, with most of their members joining the Conservatives.

The second period is between 1970 and 1984, at the end of which the Conservative vote share had dropped beneath 20 per cent for the first time and from which it failed to recover. In this period, Liverpool Council was a three-party polity with no party able to exercise overall control; either the Labour Party or the Liberals (with inconsistent Conservative support) ran ineffective minority administrations. Conservative support became concentrated in the south of the city, with nearly half their vote situated in just six of the thirty-three wards by 1978 (Kilfoyle, 2000, pp. 36–37). Thus, they were able to return a respectable amount of councillors and remain in a ‘kingmaker’ position, *but in reality refused to support Labour*.

The final period is from 1984 onwards. Conservative support continued to fall below 10 per cent and it was just as common for the party to win no seats than even one. Unlike in the country at large, the Conservatives were no longer able to hold on to their affluent, southern heartlands in the city and their vote share gained them little, if any, representation on the council.

Hence, Conservative support in Liverpool can be understood thus: until 1970, the Conservatives were the main political party in the city, benefiting from the aldermanic system which often bolstered their majorities and kept them in power even when Labour had more councillors. For example, following the 1953 local election, Labour had a majority of councillors (65 out of 120, to the Conservative’s 53), but due to the aldermanic system, the Conservatives had a majority of votes on the council (81 out of 160, to Labour’s 72). From 1970 to 1984 the Conservative vote share declines, but instead of following the trends of the previous 25 years of cyclical support, the Conservatives fail to regain lost ground resulting in a slow decline. By 1984, the Conservatives were spent as a political force in the city, their decline evolving into seemingly permanent irrelevance.

As previously mentioned, Figure 1 shows how the Conservatives’ decline began long before the Thatcher era, with the party falling from an average vote share of around 50 per cent until 1970 (and even higher if support for its sometime ally, the Protestant Party, is included), to 32.5 per cent between 1971 and 1979 inclusive. However, even during the Thatcher era, the average vote share was just shy of 20 per cent, which is significantly higher than the post-Thatcher era

average of 6.3 per cent. Hence, we cannot look solely to Thatcher to explain the Conservative decline.

Path Dependency and Socialisation

Whilst often thought of in isolation, path dependency and socialisation are interrelated phenomena. Path dependency can be understood as ‘social processes that exhibit positive feedback and thus generate branching patterns of historical development’, which, once established, reinforces a certain socialising tendency and becomes self-perpetuating, requiring a larger exogenous shock to change course (Pierson, 2004, p. 21). Pierson terms this ‘inertia’, whereby ‘Once such a process has been established, positive feedback will generally lead to a single equilibrium. This equilibrium will in turn be resistant to change’ (Pierson, 2004, p. 44).

Socialisation is the process whereby an individual’s beliefs, outlooks, and other related values are shaped by the environment in which they find themselves. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the most important period of socialisation – where an individual is most receptive to environmental cues – is during their formative years (Green *et al*, 2002, pp. 107–108; Hooghe, 2004, p. 334). This idea has gained traction in the literature on voting patterns in Britain. Butler and Stokes found that ‘Children of parents who were united in their party preference were overwhelmingly likely to have absorbed the preference at the beginning of their political experience’ (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 51). Furthermore, Ball argues that ‘people form their views shortly before or during their young adult years, between the ages of around fifteen and twenty-five, and thereafter do not greatly vary their fundamentals’ (Ball, 2013, p. 120). Thus, we can establish a relationship between the social context one is brought up in and their propensity to vote in a certain way.

There is a great analytical value in understanding the phenomenon of socialisation within a path dependency framework. Returning to Pierson, we see that path dependency arguments ‘rest on what Stinchcombe has termed a conception of “historical causes”... some initial event or process generates a particular outcome, which is then reproduced though time *even though the original generating event or process does not recur*’ (Pierson, 2004, p. 45). This concept of historical causes is essential for understanding Conservative dominance in Liverpool since it explains to some extent why such a heavily working class city resisted Labour and provided fertile ground for the Conservatives. In the case of Liverpool, this historical cause is religion and how it enabled Conservative dominance must be understood before we can understand Conservative decline.

Liverpool is perhaps unique amongst the great English cities in the extent to which religion has played a role in its development. For Baxter, religion in Liverpool ‘has dominated its political life and distorted it in a way that was unknown even in Glasgow – only Belfast can offer a comparison’ (Baxter, 1969, p. 1). The Great Famine in Ireland acted as a catalyst for huge amounts of Catholic Irish immigration into the city – at one point in the city’s history, 25 per cent of the population were Irish-born – and the majority of those who stayed in Liverpool were either too poor or unskilled to make a life elsewhere. As a result, the city became geographically split along national-religious lines (Baxter, 1969, pp. 1–2).

The socio-religious split in the city, then, had emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century and broadly continued for at least a hundred years. Debate exists surrounding the extent to which the Conservatives stoked anti-Catholic sentiment in the city, with the majority of scholars writing on the period arguing that they did (for example Belchem, 2000, p. xvi–xvii; Lees, 2011, p. 124). For Waller, it seemed ‘paradoxical that the Conservatives could be so successful, without being dishonest, in Liverpool, given the grim circumstances in which much of the population lived and worked’ (Waller, 1981, p. xix). However, O’Leary argues that the view that sectarianism ‘retarded the natural development of a unified working-class consciousness and, consequently, the forward ~~M~~march of Labour’ represents a ‘rather one dimensional, sectarian account of Liverpool’s political history’ (O’Leary, 2004, p. 158). Davies comes to a similar conclusion as O’Leary in his study of the Liverpool Labour Party in the inter-war years, finding that ‘religious sectarianism was almost certainly not as important as twentieth-century convention has made it out to be, but it was still relevant’, and that the Conservatives only used anti-Catholic sentiment in a few wards, where even there ‘the sectarian appeal was not a major factor consistently throughout the inter-war years’. Labour’s electoral nadir in the city, in 1930 and 1931, are found to be down to national crises rather than local sectarianism (Davies, 1996, p. 233).

Regardless of whether the Conservatives played on religious divides, the fact remains that the party could usually rely on strong, working-class Protestant support in the city. One of the most politically salient issues in Liverpool was the issue of Irish Home Rule, whereby those against Home Rule tended to vote for the Conservatives, whilst those in favour tended to vote for the Irish Nationalist Party (in its various guises). The strength of the Catholic Nationalist vote can be seen in the fact that Liverpool contained the only constituency outside of Ireland to return an Irish Nationalist MP – T. P. O’Connor, who represented Liverpool Scotland. As such, the potential for Labour to reach either the Protestant

working-class or the poorer Catholic working-class was heavily restricted before the 1920s. Murden argues that Labour only started to ‘emerge as a significant force after it merged with the Catholic Centre Party in 1928’, the consequences of which are spelt out later (Murden, 2006, p. 448).

The final political force in the city, the Liberals, failed to become as successful as the Conservatives due to their support for Irish Home Rule, which alienated Protestants, whilst Catholics felt better represented by explicitly Catholic parties. As such, Liberal support was reliant upon a smaller, squeezed, electoral base of artisans and large business owners. Furthermore, the Liberals appeared aloof, in stark contrast to the ‘man of the people’ approach taken by prominent Tories. Belchem quotes the *Daily Post* from October 1861, which reported that the Conservatives ‘owed their mastery in municipal matters to their ready rapport with the electorate’, with electoral confidence leading to their being

affable, kind and conciliating. There is about them what is called bonhommie [sic]. The leading Liberals, on the other hand, are somewhat imperious. They are not conciliatory; they repel rather than attract. In fact, they are far more exclusive than the Tories (quoted in Belchem, 2000, p. 174).

Thus, 19th century Toryism in Liverpool ‘continued to thrive in the interlocking associational network – party, popular and sectarian – which facilitated ready interaction between the classes’ (Belchem, 2000, p. 174). This interaction was rooted in the Working Men’s Conservative Association, a vehicle which the Liverpool Conservative leader ~~Alderman~~ Archibald Salvidge, a self-made brewer and publican, aimed to transform into ‘a big name [with] lots of power, [to] make the city into a real democracy and show the masses how they can rule themselves’ (O’Leary, 2004, p. 166). O’Leary highlights that Conservative representatives were heavily involved in working-class pastimes, with both ‘Everton and Liverpool Football Clubs... founded thanks to the patronage of ‘King John Houlding’ of Everton, a self-made publican and Tory councillor’ (O’Leary, 2004, p. 169).

As such, party political support in Liverpool in the nineteenth and early twentieth century was based on the religious divides between Protestant and Catholics, not class. Generally, the Protestant electors lent their support to the Conservatives, whilst the Catholics backed the various Catholic parties and later the Labour ~~P~~Party (Roberts, 1965).

1918 is seen as the election when class had replaced religion as the main determinant of voting behaviour, but the effects of this were not instantaneous

(Wald, 1983, p. 250; Butler and Stokes, 1974, pp. 409–410). Whilst the replacement of religion with class in a city with Liverpool's socioeconomic makeup would lead one to expect a massive surge in support for Labour, this did not occur. In the 1951 general election, the Liverpool Conservatives polled 51 per cent to Labour's 49 per cent, by 1955, this lead increased to 52.5 per cent to 46.7 per cent, respectively, and in 1959 it had grown further, to 53.4 per cent to 45.2 per cent, respectively (Butler and Stokes, 1952, p. 264; Butler and Stokes, 1955, p. 184; Butler and Rose, 1960, p. 218). However, whilst the direct importance of religion may not have declined in Liverpool as early as elsewhere, decline it eventually did. For Ramsden, this was evident by the 1964 general election, which he terms an:

historically significant milestone... traditional religious cleavages broke down with remarkable suddenness; without militant Protestantism Glasgow and Liverpool soon became almost no-go areas for Conservatives, who hung on to only four of the two cities' twenty-four seats where previously they had held half of them; at Bebington, Geoffrey Howe saw a large majority shrink to marginal proportions as 'people – even Irish people, on Merseyside at least – were more inclined to vote with their class than with their Church' (Ramsden, 1996, p. 230).

As previously mentioned, to focus on general elections, as Ramsden has, in Liverpool provides a unidimensional perspective on Conservative decline and cannot account for the highs of 1969 or the sudden, dramatic decline in 1973. It also hides the fact that the Conservatives still won over 40 per cent of the vote in the next two general elections. Ramsden's broader point, however, still stands; the direct link between Protestantism and Conservatism had been deteriorating. However, even though the direct relationship between religion and voting behaviour may have eroded, Stinchcombe's concept of historical causes is useful to understand just why the Conservatives were able to continue to rely on such a large segment of working-class support in the city until the 1970s.

Political socialisation is most effective during one's formative years, with parental leads and social milieu providing the most important cues. As such, a Liverpudlian child born into a working-class family may have been expected to vote Labour but if their parents were Protestants and from an era where Irish Home Rule was a salient issue it would be highly likely that the parents would support the Conservatives, and pass this Conservative support to their child. Furthermore, if the family lived in an environment which was heavily Conservative, perhaps due to being heavily Protestant (such as the Woolton or Warbreck wards), the environmental influences would also prompt the child to

support the Conservatives. Hence, the historical cause of Protestantism would be the reason why the child supported the Conservatives, whilst socialisation would be the mechanism by which that support was transmitted through generations.

For Ball, the socialisation of working-class Conservatives until 1945 was, on a national level at least, partly a result of Labour's newness in the eyes of the electorate. Ball states that the

pre-1935 age group were those whose socialization was in the period when the Labour Party was either marginal, untried, and possibly alarming (before 1923), or when it was a more significant force but not yet an established or successful party of government (1924–1935) [and that] only the Conservatives were credible contenders for power throughout the interwar era, a position which has always paid dividends for the party in attracting support from all social classes (Ball, 2013, p. 121).

This view is supported by Butler and Stokes (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 185) and can be applied to the local level. Since the Conservatives were almost consistently in power from the mid-nineteenth century, they could be portrayed as the natural party of local government in Liverpool, with Labour yet to gain the legitimacy granted in 1945 and the Liberals a declining force.

Clearly, this pattern of socialisation could not continue indefinitely. Like a fast-moving bike on a flat road, without peddling eventually friction will slow it to a halt – and in this case, the friction was provided by the national-level class socialisation patterns. Butler and Stokes noted that those who were socialised in a 'politically homogenous' environment 'almost never seem to have deserted their parents' party (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 65). Crucially, however, if an individual faces no partisan lead from their parents they tend to accept 'the lead that is so clearly given in Britain by a class milieu', whilst for those facing conflicting socialisation patterns (perhaps one parent or side of the family votes Tory) 'the possibility of a change of preference became much greater' (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 57; p. 65). **However** **Importantly**, over time, voters who supported one of the two leading parties at one election were 'far more likely to shift towards the other party at the next election if this shift moved him towards the dominant opinion within his local constituency rather than away from it' (Butler and Stokes, 1974, p. 140). This is perhaps to be expected, since both scenarios represent the path of least resistance. It does, however, emphasise the positive reinforcement aspect of the movement to Labour in the city; Labour's increasing national dominance amongst the working class would serve to increase the reach and effectiveness of the socialisation of new voters, whilst

those who faced competing socialisation pressures were more likely to switch towards their ‘natural’ party (based on class), usually Labour. Thus, the Conservatives were harmed twice-over by this trend; firstly, as class replaces religion voters would be more likely to support Labour initially, and those who changed their party allegiance would be more likely to move to Labour.

Hence, religious identity mattered for Conservative socialisation in Liverpool; it provided the initial link between the working class and Conservative voting, and was the ‘historical cause’ for parental and neighbourhood socialisation which sustained Conservative support after 1945. Due to the strength of religious feeling in Liverpool, this continued longer than it would have in other cities, and certainly longer than one would expect given the economic and demographic makeup of the city. However, over time the national-level socialising effects of class eroded the number of new Conservative voters, until they became concentrated in the southern, affluent wards of the city.

Thus, one aspect of the Conservatives’ surprising strength in the city before 1970 can be attributed to socialisation patterns, as can the long-term decline. This, however, does not explain the sudden increase in Conservative support in the mid-1960s nor the sharp decline in the party’s fortunes from 1970 onwards. ~~Thus~~ Instead, we must look at factors exogenous to the path-dependent socialisation model given here, specifically the role that national politics played on local election results.

National Influences

In order to explain the short-term swings away from a general trend of Conservative decline, we must look beyond the socialisation thesis and move to other influences on voting behaviour – the most obvious being the behaviour of politicians. Although academic work on analysing election results and political opinion in Liverpool is sparse, there is a limited amount of information available in the two local newspapers in circulation at that time, the *Liverpool Echo* and the *Daily Post*. Although the analysis is not extensive, there is sufficient material available to paint a picture of how national-level events impacted on local election results to explain the impressive Conservative rise and fall between 1965 and 1975. The picture painted below also chimes with evidence provided by an internal investigation into why the Liverpool Conservatives fared so poorly in the 1962 local elections, where in many wards, national issues overshadowed local issues (“Report on Municipal Elections”, 1962).

Perhaps unsurprisingly (and not altogether unreasonably), there is a consistent pattern of Labour and the Conservatives attributing their defeats to the

unpopularity of their respective party in government, a view broadly shared by their rivals. For example, discussing Labour's 1965 defeat Alderman Sefton, the council and Labour group leader, claimed:

It is evident that the difficult and unpopular decisions the Labour Government has had to take in order to rectify the effects of the neglect of our economic affairs arising from the failure of the last Government to tackle the problems in time has led to a feeling of frustration among some people.

Alderman Steward, leader of the Conservative Party, agreed that dissatisfaction with the national government was a factor (*Daily Post*, 14 May 1965). This victory was reflective of a general national trend towards the Conservatives which continued until 1970. Whilst in 1965 and 1966, the issue of comprehensive education was billed as an important factor in local politics by the Conservatives, turnout remained low which suggests that local passions were not aroused by the issue (*Daily Post*, 15 May 1966).

Whether this swing to the Conservatives was the result of Conservative popularity or a reduction in turnout of Labour voters is a pertinent question. For the *Daily Post*, the answer was clearly the latter; 'the uncomfortable fact remains that hardly anywhere have the Conservatives actually increased their total poll... it is abstentions rather than actual desertions that are troubling the Labour Party – and to a lesser extent the Liberals too' (*Daily Post*, 15 May 1965). Regardless, in 1967 the Conservatives took control of the council and Alderman Sefton again repeated the refrain that his party's losses were a result of discontent 'with the Government's economic policies' (*Liverpool Echo*, 12 May 1967). This view is supported by the *Liverpool Echo*'s editorial, which stated 'As elsewhere in the country, the political change in Liverpool City Council is chiefly the product of a protest vote against Government, not local, policies' (*Liverpool Echo*, 12 May 1967). Meanwhile, the Liberals were still floundering, their total votes falling from 8,129 in 1966 to 6,493 in 1967 despite having one more candidate in 1967 (*Daily Post*, 12 May 1967).

After securing control of the council, 1968 saw a further Conservative victory with successes reported in all parts of the city leading the *Liverpool Echo* to claim that 'if a General Election were held now and produced the same result, Liverpool would be an all-Conservative city' with local issues of little importance (*Liverpool Echo*, 10 May 1968). Opposition to a proposed motorway line was the basis of an attempt by the Liberals to whip up local fury, but 'to no avail' (*Daily Post*, 10 May 1968). Furthermore, the *Liverpool Echo* argued that low turnout was because 'the hearts of erstwhile Labour supporters must be

heavy' due to the Conservatives' national lead in the polls, a view shared by the *Daily Post* (*Liverpool Echo*, 10 May 1968; *Daily Post*, 9 May 1968). By 1969, Labour numbered just '41, including 18 aldermen', and 'Not since 1951, when Labour's total strength on the council was 40, has the picture looked so gloomy' (*Liverpool Echo*, 9 May 1969). The *Daily Post* believed that:

even the leaders of the major parties in Liverpool City Council don't see any major issues to fire the electors' enthusiasm... This must drive some to vote on national party issues, which is always a poor approach to local polls, and others to stay away altogether' (*Daily Post*, 7 May 1968).

As such, we can see that informed opinion pinned the majority of the Conservative gain on dissatisfaction with the national government. What is important to note, however, is that the Liberals did not seem to benefit from this dissatisfaction at all – by 1969 they had just 3 seats – since Labour voters chose to stay at home, rather than transfer allegiance to the Liberals. This can be attributed to the fact they were not perceived as a serious contender by many, they failed to have a distinctive policy programme and did not stand a full slate of candidates until 1975 so many voters could not vote for them even if they wanted to.

However, with Heath's victory in 1970, the effects of dissatisfaction with national politics on local election results began to work against the Conservatives. 1970 saw a swing to Labour in the local elections, and analysis by Alderman Steward found that 'The outstanding feature of the election is the great increase in the Labour vote. It will be noted, however, that the Tory support is not dropping, but that discontents of the Labour movement are coming back to their support' (*Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1970). 63,955 people voted Labour in Liverpool in 1970, compared with 35,940 in 1969, whilst the Conservative vote actually increased by 329, from 72,255 in 1969 to 72,584 in 1970 (*Liverpool Echo*, 8 May 1970). 1971 saw further Conservative decline, with their council majority reduced to 25 and their vote reduced to 48,040, compared to Labour's 80,761. For Alderman Steward, 'There is little doubt that once again the electors are voting against the government of the day' (*Liverpool Echo*, 14 May 1971). By 1972, Labour were in control of the city on the back of a promise to not implement the Government's Fair Rent Bill, with Alderman Sefton arguing that this, plus dissatisfaction with the government more generally, contributed to the Conservatives' downfall (*Liverpool Echo*, 4 May 1972). Indeed, it is important to note that in these years of Labour victories, turnout was on average around 4 per cent higher than during the Conservative victories (6 per cent if the anomalous 1967 turnout figure is excluded), thus supporting the idea that Labour

voters were more likely to turn out to register their dissatisfaction with the Conservative government.

It is also important to note that the growth in the Liberal vote, from 9,974 in 1969 and 11,381 in 1970 to 18,972 in 1971 and 23,514 in 1972, suggests that many Conservative supporters felt able to do what Labour supporters in the late 1960s did not and register their dissatisfaction with the government by transferring their support to the Liberal party rather than abstaining.

Following the Local Government Act 1972, the number of wards in Liverpool was reduced from 40 to 33 and the aldermanic system was abolished. The whole council was up for election, with the Liberals unexpectedly winning a plurality of seats and coming just two short of a majority. Ironically the Conservatives, with just 9 seats and their lowest seat share in a century, held the balance of power. Again, Conservative failure was blamed on classic ‘mid-term blues’, and the effect of the Liberals’ effective local campaigning (*Daily Post*, 11 May 1973).

However, by the next local election in 1975, Wilson was once again Prime Minister but the Conservatives gained just 5 seats compared to the ‘substantial Tory gains in the Metropolitan District Council elections’ across Merseyside, which the *Liverpool Echo* argued ‘will have come as a sharp warning to the Government that the electorate is far from pleased with the way things are going’ (*Liverpool Echo*, 2 May 1975). Thus, nationally, whilst dissatisfaction with a Labour government resulted in Conservative gains, this does not occur to any significant extent in Liverpool – which was especially concerning for the Conservatives since they had been expecting a swing back to them following the huge surge in support for the Liberals seen in the previous election.

Instead, what can be seen is that since the Conservatives were defeated so significantly and suddenly in many wards in 1973, as a result of the whole council being up for election, that there was a shift in the narrative of Liverpool local politics. It was now the Liberals, not the Conservatives, who could legitimately claim to be a voter’s best chance of keeping Labour out and thus those who voted Conservative because they were anti-Socialist rather than pro-Conservative had another party for whom they could vote. As a result, the Conservative vote became increasingly concentrated in a few safe wards, whereas elsewhere the Liberals became the main opposition to Labour. This can be shown in the results of the 1976 local election, where the Conservatives won 6 seats on 45,410 votes, compared to the Liberals’ 13 seats on the lower tally of 40,283 votes and Labour’s 15 seats on 46,321 votes.

Furthermore, Frost and North highlight how ‘Liverpool Liberals were closer philosophically to the Tories and their approach was consequently not attractive to many radicals in the city’, meaning that they took disproportionately more votes from the Conservative vote share (Frost and North, 2013, p. 43). Kilfoyle shares this view, claiming:

the Liberals accumulated support from disillusioned Tories, in part delivered by a residual Protestant logic that equated the Liverpool Labour Party with the Vatican, and they also appealed to a fledgling constituency of owner-occupiers, potential owner-occupiers and private-sector tenants, many of whom had been ‘brought up’ Labour but had since begun to see little in the party to keep them loyal. (Kilfoyle, 2000, pp. 29–30).

It is important to note Kilfoyle’s partisan leanings; he was the Labour North West Regional Organiser (1986–1991) and MP for Liverpool Walton (1991–2010). In this case, however, his political alignment does not detract from the point made, with his view is supported by the fact that the Conservatives’ slight electoral recovery in the mid-1970s took more seats from the Liberals than Labour, evidence that Liberal voters were previously Conservative voters.

Thus, the ability of the Liberals to provide an alternative to the Conservatives put the final nail in the coffin of the Liverpool Conservatives. Unable to rely on Protestantism or socialisation to provide working-class votes, nor their claim to be the main anti-socialist party in Liverpool, the Conservatives began to suffer electorally. Indeed, their strength came in low turnout when Labour voters could not be bothered to vote, which is also one reason why Labour outperformed the Conservatives in general elections from 1964 onwards as general elections have much higher turnout than local elections. The importance of differing turnout levels between party supporters also explains how the Conservatives managed to maintain a high vote share despite the declining effects of socialisation.

As such, the twin forces of the unpopular Heath government and the rise of the Liberals as an alternative opposition to socialism, coupled with a socialisation trend which favoured the Labour party, meant the Conservatives were doomed; the rotting foundations of their support had collapsed beneath them, and ~~it was a fate from which they were unable to recover~~ they were unable to emerge from the rubble.

The Liberal Rise: Party Machines and Pavement Politics

The rise of the Liberal Party was nothing short of astounding. In 1969, they held just three seats but by 1973 they were only three seats short of a council. Some of the reasons for this rise have been mentioned previously but it is important to flesh out a full account of how this success came about. The causes are a mix of long- and short-term factors. In the long-term, the aforementioned weakening socialisation trends contributed to the decline of the Conservative electoral base, whilst the closed party machines which were common in the city bred disaffection and a lack of engagement in local politics. In the short term, the Liberals' – especially the Liberal Youth's – emphasis on pavement politics was an effective campaigning strategy which allowed the Liberals to encourage voters to vote in local elections on local issues, rather than the national issues shown to be so important previously.

The problem of closed party machines had plagued Liverpool for decades. As Baxter notes:

In common with many cities in the United States of America, which have large Irish immigrant communities, Liverpool developed a political power structure that was not entirely in accordance with liberal democratic theory, and was out of line with the normal practice of British political parties. The leaders of both the Conservative and Labour Parties acquired unusual power inside their organisations (Baxter, 1969, p. 1).

We can see evidence of this surfacing as early as 1936, in Conservative activist Whittingham-Jones' series of biting pamphlets attacking the influence of the 'Orange caucus' on the Liverpool Conservative Party. She claimed that, following the enactment of the Corporation Schools policy:

Liverpool Tories discovered that the talisman to electoral victories was the 'Protestant ticket', and, so well did they learn their lesson that, long after it has ceased to be infallible they persist in thinking the magic of 'No Popery!' is still sovereign on Liverpool hustings (Whittingham-Jones, 1936, p. 37).

The relationship between religion and politics had become too close for Whittingham-Jones, with entry into the Conservative Party machinery being 'rigidly confined to Protestant electors', for example through the practice in the Workingmen's Conservative Clubs of 'requiring members who have been guilty of 'consorting' with Catholics to confess their delinquencies and upon doing so they then receive a warning. Catholics who have strayed in by chance are requested to leave the room'. She warned that the exclusion of Catholics reduced

the party's appeal to 'the thousands of non-sectarian electors of all classes whom the Caucus deliberately avoids bringing in' (Whittingham-Jones, 1936, pp. 7–8).

Powerful, popular, dominating party leaders, coupled with continued electoral success on the back of working-class Protestantism, led to numerous opportunities for the exercise of the power of patronage, resulting in the emergence of 'boss politics' within the Conservative party. Kilfoyle argues that historically 'politics in Liverpool was managed primarily by a number of city 'bosses'. Turn after turn, this was typified by the Conservative leaders Arthur Furwood, Archibald Salvidge, Thomas White and Alfred Shennan, and then Labour's Jack Braddock' (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 22). For the Conservatives, boss politics did not result in a detachment from voters, whilst the Workingman's Conservative Clubs were active until the mid-1950s, as this provided a link with their working-class base, but following their decline this legacy of bossism resulted in a Conservative Party which had very few roots in the local community. This lack of local roots was indeed recognised by the party itself, with the party's Central Office Agent for the North West arguing in a confidential report in 1956 that 'until recently no effort has been made to enlist members or carry out any of the organisational methods to which the Central Office attaches so much importance. Its Women's, Y.C. [Young Conservative] and C.T.U. [Conservative Trade Unionist] sections are well below the average, there is no marked register and the amount of canvassing and doorstep work carried out is negligible' (Banks, 1956). Similarly, the loss of the Church and St. Michael's wards in 1962 to the Liberals was attributed to weak local organisations by the party's own internal investigation ("Report on Municipal Elections", 1962), a problem which had spread across the city by 1966 (Macdonald Steward, 1966). As such, the centralisation of power by Conservative bosses had served to consistently undermine the life of the various wards and constituency associations.

For Labour, the cause of boss politics was clear. As previously mentioned, Labour only gained traction in the city when the Catholic Centre Party merged with the Labour Party in 1928, due to the Archbishop of Liverpool's opposition to political groupings based on religion. As a result, this:

handed over to the Labour Party a substantial body of politically active working-class people who were not socialist; who indeed were not in politics for class reasons at all, but were involved for nationalist and religious reasons – motives that were basically irrelevant to the Labour Party (Baxter, 1972, p. 106).

This was not overly problematic for the Labour Party, since during this time ‘the Catholicism of many electors and elected came before their Socialism. Labour inherited rather than won Nationalist seats’ (Waller, 1981, p. 324). Indeed, the strength of the Catholic vote is highlighted by the anecdote that, in 1931, the only seat which Labour didn’t lose in Liverpool was the ‘the imperishably Catholic Scotland division’ where the incumbent, David Logan, ‘was confident of beating all-comers, “from the Prime Minister downwards”’ (Waller, 1981, p. 328).

For Kilfoyle, Labour councillors after 1945 were lacking the ‘experience of local government and the mix of pragmatism and ideology common in Britain’s other great cities, and influenced as it was by the more conspiratorial aspects of Irish politics, Liverpool’s Labour Party was deeply affected by Tory-bequeathed boss politics’ (Kilfoyle, 2000, pp. 1–2). When Labour gained control of the council in 1955 the leader, Jack Braddock, continued the tradition of boss politics. Even when the Catholic councillors and aldermen were lost following the Conservative victory of 1961 and their seats regained in 1963 by Labour councillors inspired by class rather than religion, this culture of boss politics continued (Baxter, 1972, p. 103). It was under Braddock, and his ‘methods coated in the language of contracts and contacts, reeking of returnable favours’, that Anthony Howard described Liverpool as ‘Cook County, UK’ (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 2).

The closed nature of Liverpool Labour was evident not just in the council group, but also in the local associations. Kilfoyle recalls how he was stopped from joining his local association in the 1960s, being told that ‘the ward was ‘full up’ and that there was ‘an extended process’ for new members wanting to join’, concluding that ‘in Liverpool generally, an attitude prevailed of: ‘Keep it closed. Keep it tight. Keep new blood out’’. Again, this is traced back to the Tammany Hall style of politics, where influential councillors and MPs kept membership low and exclusive to protect their ‘private fiefdoms’ (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 6).

This brief outline shows the extent to which the two parties, based on the legacy of sectarianism and powerful leaders, led to a political system in the city which was closed off from the majority of the public, and actively excluded membership in the case of the Labour Party. It is in this context that the Liberals were able to capitalise on dissatisfaction with the two main parties, reaching out to those who did not vote and those who voted for other parties out of habit or as a ‘least bad’ option – in this case, drawing more support from the Conservatives than Labour, but still affecting both parties (Parkinson, 1985, pp. 19–20).

The Liberal rise is impressive not only because it made such significant gains in such a short period of time, but also because it did so in a city with no strong history of liberalism and a party organisation which amounted to a ward, a constituency, and a city-wide party, with positions generally filled by the same people (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 27). Although the groundwork had been laid under Jo Grimmond's leadership, the turn to pavement politics in the local party came following the disappointing 1970 general election result when a resolution put forward by the Young Liberals to the party's autumn assembly of that year, which suggested the party 'focus its campaigning at the community level', was accepted (Dutton, 2013, p. 197). The logic was that success on a local level, based on an effort 'to help organize people in their communities to take and use power... to build a Liberal power-base in the major cities of the country... to capture people's imagination as a credible political movement, with local roots and local successes' would trickle up, into success on a constituency level (Dutton, 2013, p. 197).

Frost and North argue that the move to the pavement politics strategy drew in 'an energetic new wave of activists in the Liberal Party, and in particular, the Young Liberals', which 'began to challenge the moribund Labour and Conservative machines' through this strategy of pavement politics, focusing 'on identifying and meeting local needs, exposing the machines as complacent and out of touch at best, corrupt and authoritarian at worst' (Frost and North, 2013, p. 42). Murden concurs, seeing pavement politics 'a reaction to the national Tory government and the failure of the LLP [Liverpool Labour Party] to provide solutions locally... providing "a city under fire with an analgesic form of local politics"' (Murden, 2006, p. 452). For Kilfoyle, the Liberals were able to capitalise on the fact that:

The borough council, in the hands of either Labour or the Conservatives, was failing to deliver the most basic and vital of services, particularly street cleaning and refuse collection... Most crucially, both parties presided over a redevelopment process in Liverpool which had seen large inner-city communities 'uprooted and transported to outlying housing 'bantustans'.

Further to this, the Labour Party was becoming 'more introspective... overly concerned with the divisions within the Labour group and debates within the Trades' Council' whilst the unpopular Heath government eroded support for the local Conservatives (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 27).

As a strategy, pavement politics involved a number of then-novel campaigning techniques, such as the *Focus* newsletter, which 'became the hallmark of much

local campaigning' (Stevenson, 1988, p. 23). From the perspective of someone involved in the Labour Party, Kilfoyle derides pavement politics as 'cheap confidence tricks' which deceived a 'gullible and near-despairing electorate' (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 30). He describes *Focus* as a flexible tool used to target each ward with key ultra-local issues:

Typically, *Focus* would include bold headings with variations on the theme of: 'The Liberals have put the pressure on the council and the following things have been done'; whilst underneath would be the equally emphatic: 'We have asked the Labour council about the following but still nothing has been done' (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 28).

This represented a new approach to politics in Liverpool – the fact it was not mimicked by their rivals was due to differing views on the appropriate role and aims of the local council, rather than doubts on its effectiveness as a vote winner. Whilst the Liberals focused on the issues of cracked pavements and refuse removal, opponents blasted them for not having a broader vision; Sefton's earthy observation was that 'They concentrated on bloody pavements when the unemployed were walking over them!' (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 28). Regardless of Labour's views, as Weightman argued 'By holding up a magnifying glass to the city's cracked paving stones, and offering 'community politics' to mend them, the Liberal Party clearly struck a chord more profound than mere parochialism' (Weightman, 1974).

Traces of the nascent Liberal approach can be seen in various communications with the electorate. On the eve of polling in 1967, the Liberal leader – and sole councillor – Cyril Carr focused not on ideology or policy, but rather on the claim that 'For years only shades of emphasis have separated the Labour and Tory Machines in Liverpool. No wonder less than one in three of the electorate bother to vote at all', and talk of a 'Labour/Tory establishment... an artificial battle between the twin political juggernauts' (*Liverpool Echo*, 10 May 1967). This line was again repeated in 1970, almost word for word, with a nod to the rising emphasis on pavement politics by arguing 'It has been left to the Liberals to define and fight for the real issues. Liverpool's streets and pavements are dirty and dangerous. We have started a massive campaign to clean up the city. It's about time' (*Liverpool Echo*, 6 May 1970).

Hence, to some extent, the rise of the Liberals was due to luck – they were blessed with long-term social trends which undermined Conservative support and local political parties whose distance increased dissatisfaction amongst the electorate and who emphasised grand plans, such as the troubled municipally

owned airport or new housing estates, rather than tackling sources of local ire. On the other hand, without taking the decision to follow the pavement politics strategy, and doing so with such skill and gusto (indeed, when the Labour Party asked the local press why they gave so much attention to the Liberals, they were told that they ‘were ringing them up every day with a story’), it is unlikely the Liberals would have won the support they did (Kilfoyle, 2000, p. 29).

Conclusions

Whilst it is undeniable that the Liverpool Conservatives faced electoral decline under Thatcher’s government, I have argued that the initial causes of this decline in cannot be attributed to the Iron Lady herself. Instead, this analysis offers an alternative explanation of Conservative decline in Liverpool. Firstly, the erosion of long-term socialisation trends which had typically sustained Conservative support, despite the socioeconomic structure of Liverpool, meant that people were less likely to inherit a strong Conservative identity. However, this alone was not enough to guarantee continued decline. Although the Conservatives did suffer as a result of voter dissatisfaction with the Heath government, just a few years earlier the Tories had their best post-war election result and there was nothing to suggest that the typical two-party cycle in Liverpool would not continue when Wilson was returned to Downing Street, especially since there was no alternative party to vote for in many wards.

However, the rise of the Liberals and their use of pavement politics allowed the party to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public, especially on local issues, with Conservative voters disgruntled with the Heath government comfortable voting for the Liberals since they were also anti-socialist. Furthermore, on a local level those dissatisfied with the lacklustre, unresponsive local party machines could also find a home in the Liberals.

These factors led to the erosion of the Conservative vote share for two reasons. Firstly, the number of Conservative voters in the city was lower than Labour’s, but could be relied upon to turn out and vote. Thus, if the Liberals took equal numbers of Conservative and Labour supporters, then the likelihood is that the Conservative vote would decline more as these would have been more likely to vote. Secondly, the sudden success of the Liberals in the 1973 local election, when the whole council was up for election, created a powerful narrative which placed the Liberals, not the Conservatives, as the primary opposition to Labour in many wards. This may not have been the case had the elections continued in their traditional, gradual manner of electing just one-third each year. This narrative prevented the usual cyclical Tory recovery experienced in past years, since those who voted Conservative to oppose Labour would now face greater

pressure to vote Liberal. All of these trends continued during the Thatcher era, but they had their origins well before her premiership.

Thus, the Conservative decline in Liverpool can be attributed to a weakening support base through declining socialisation, dissatisfaction with the Heath government and party machines unresponsive to local issues leading to a gap in the electoral market which the Liberals were able to exploit through their pavement politics strategy. The Liberals’ sudden success in 1973 allowed the party to present itself as the main opposition to Labour, and thus squeeze the Conservative vote further. These factors came together in the early 1970s as a perfect storm, and it was not of Maggie’s making.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by Queen Mary University of London and the ESRC (Grant Number 1523299).

Appendix

See Table 1 .

Table 1
Turnout and vote share in local elections in Liverpool

	Turnout	Vote share		
		Conservative	Labour	Liberal
1945	41.1	44.7	47.5	3.6
1946	40.4	51.4	44.9	0.9
1947	48.2	57.4	39.1	0.5
1949	45.8	53.2	43.1	0.7
1950	41.2	55.1	41.6	0.7
1951	40.3	57.4	38.7	0.8
1952	45.1	44.6	52.7	0.7
1953	45.5	48.7	46.6	1.0
1954	41.5	47.7	51.1	0.2
1955	42.6	51.9	44.7	0.0
1956	35.4	47.7	49.0	0.7
1957	35.7	49.5	47.8	1.4
1958	35.2	45.6	51.4	2.5

		Vote share		
1959	35.6 Turnout	49.9	43.7	3.1
1960	28.8	Conservative 55.9	Labour 37.8	Liberal 5.5
1961	34.6	52.2	40.7	4.2
1962	33.5	40.8	48.5	7.8
1963	38.2	36.6	48.7	12.2
1964	33.7	41.4	48.4	7.7
1965	30.7	53.2	38.8	5.5
1966	26.8	51.6	39.4	6.7
1967	35.8	57.9	34.9	4.1
1968	28.5	61.7	25.3	9.8
1969	29.6	60.1	27.9	7.9
1970	33.8	47.9	42.2	7.5
1971	33.7	32.0	53.7	12.5
1972	43.6	33.0	49.3	15.8
1973	26.1	26.9	35.4	35.4
1975	27.8	34.2	31.2	33.0
1976	32.7	34.1	34.7	30.2
1978	32.9	36.7	32.8	29.2
1979	68.2	30.6	40.7	27.9
1980	25.2	29.4	35.8	32.9
1982	35.7	25.1	38.8	35.5
1983	41.6	21.3	45.8	26.1
1984	49.9	19.1	46.4	34.1
1986	45.0	12.8	41.4	44.7
1987	50.2	9.3	43.1	46.2
1988	42.7	11.7	55.2	30.4
1990	48.6	7.4	55.7	32.9
1991	40.4	10.8	37.3	38.2
1992	31.5	13.0	33.0	38.0

		Vote share		
1994	36.0	6.1	43.8	40.9
	Turnout			
1995	30.6	Conservative	Labour	Liberal
		5.6	47.6	38.0
1996	27.2	6.4	40.3	39.8
<i>Source: Rallings et al (2006).</i>				
Until 1980 Liberal Party candidates.				
1982–1987 Lib/SDP and SDP/Lib candidates.				
1988–1990 Social and Liberal Democrats candidates.				
1991 onwards Liberal Democrat candidates.				

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